

Active Living with Arthritis Podcast #9

Being a Caregiver: Caring for Someone and Managing Your Arthritis

Karen: Welcome to another Active Living with Arthritis podcast, presented by ENACT center at Boston University as part of our Interact with ENACT series. We're here to bring you evidence-based information related to arthritis and rehabilitation. I'm Dr. Karen Jacobs, an Occupational Therapist, and professor in occupational therapy at Boston University, and your host for this podcast about being a caregiver with arthritis. I'm happy to be speaking with Kaitlin Thompson and Amber Steckel, candidates for the Doctor of Physical Therapy degree at Boston University. Thank you both for being here with me today, let's get started. Kaitlin, I often interact with caregivers and one of the biggest concerns is that it can be a very demanding job. Do you have any suggestions for reducing the physical load on the body, or is this an unavoidable part of being a caregiver?

Kaitlin: That's a great question, Karen. You're right, caregiving can be very physically demanding. Some people require a lot of help with daily activities like getting from the bed into a chair, walking, using the bathroom, and showering. Many of these tasks involve performing a transfer – that is, helping someone move from one position to another – like from a wheelchair to a toilet or from sitting to standing. Depending on how much assistance must be provided, these tasks can put stress on the joints of someone with arthritis.

Karen: I can only imagine how helping someone move from place to place could put a lot of strain on the body. Amber, can you explain how to do this safely?

Amber: Sure. Performing transfers is something you may have to do several times throughout the day and it's important to make sure you are using the right body mechanics. That means making sure both your body and their body are in the best positions possible to safely perform the transfer and reduce the risk of either of you getting hurt. I'll talk about how to perform a stand-pivot transfer using the example of moving someone

from a bed to a chair. Before you even begin to move them, stand as close to the person as possible. Squat down at the knees and hips, while keeping your back straight. Both of these things will decrease the stress on your back as you help move them. Now for the actual transfer. The key is to remember you don't need to lift the person to a full standing position. So, rather than lifting with your arms, let the weight of your body do most of the work. You should be able to find a balance point between the two of you before you pivot to the chair. When lowering them into the chair, remember to use the same good body mechanics – that is, keeping your back straight and only bending at the knees and hips to lower them down. The more you practice this maneuver, the easier it will become. Please go to the ENACT website (www.bu.edu/ENACT) and look at the Key Points and References page for a more detailed description, pictures, and videos of how to safely do this transfer. But if you have ANY questions with this, please talk with the health care providers of your care recipient and ask them to instruct you in safe transfer techniques.

Karen: Amber, thanks for those great tips! Having good body mechanics is such an important part of safely moving someone. Kaitlin, what about those who can't perform the stand-pivot transfer? Is there another way to help the individual get from one surface to another?

Kaitlin: There is another option – it's called a slide board transfer. A slide board is a small rectangular board that can be placed under an individual to help them scoot from one surface to another. It's usually wooden or plastic. The body mechanics of this transfer are very similar to the stand-pivot transfer – the main difference is that instead of finding a balance point between you and the individual, you are helping them scoot across the slide board. This transfer takes less effort because the board does a lot of the work for you. It can also be easier on your back, especially if you have back pain or have experienced back pain in the past several years. A slide board transfer is best if your care recipient has some upper body strength and trunk control. Many reliable companies sell slide boards online. You can order one for \$20 to \$40 and have it delivered right to your home. Although there is a cost, the amount of assistance and the protection it

provides your body is well worth the investment. On the Key Points and References page, we've provided links with tips on how to safely perform this type of transfer. Again, keep in mind; you may need to get skilled training from a physical or occupational therapist on how to use a slide board properly. Sometimes health care providers tend to think about only what the patient needs rather than what both the patient and caregiver need. But remember, you'll be helping this person every day, making you an important part of their care – so don't hesitate to ask questions regarding your safety as well.

Karen: Thanks for sharing another option with us, Kaitlin! Now, let's change topics and talk about a different type of physical demand caregivers might face. Amber, a lot of caregivers have to perform household chores in addition to caring for an individual, which can be even more exhausting on the body. Do you have any tips for those people with this added physical challenge?

Amber: That's a great question, Karen. One way to reduce the impact of all this work on your joints is simply to break up the household tasks throughout the day or week. Tackle one task at a time, and take a break before moving on to the next one. Another great tip is to write out a schedule for each day. You should find a way to balance all the activities you need to do in your life. This includes your caregiving tasks, your household tasks, and all the things you need to do to take care of your own arthritis. Although it may be a little time-consuming at first, writing down a general schedule each day can help you balance your activities, stick to your plan, and prevent you from overdoing activity. It's also important to take breaks before you notice your pain or stiffness flaring up. By that point it will be too late and you will have already overdone it. So, make sure you take breaks when you have scheduled them, not once your joints have already become fatigued and painful.

Karen: That's a really great point. Now, Kaitlin, do you have anything to add for caregivers with a lot of household duties?

Kaitlin: Yes, let's talk about some specific changes you can make. One option is to use a hand-truck or a platform on wheels to transport heavy loads around the house. A hand-truck is a metal frame on wheels with a small ledge at the bottom and a handle at the top. Using this over time greatly decreases the load on your knees and hips. Make sure you are not leaning forward and putting your full body weight on the rolling platform – this could put you at risk for a fall. I should also point out that it may be difficult to use one of these devices if there are uneven surfaces in the house or small doorways between rooms. However, if you do have the proper setup in your house, this is an excellent way to take some of the stress off your joints that comes with carrying heavy loads.

Karen: That's a great idea! Amber, do you have any more examples to share with us?

Amber: Yes, let's talk about doing laundry. Using Kaitlin's suggestion, you could put the laundry hamper on the hand-truck to transport it between rooms. You can also sit down while folding, ironing, or putting the clothes on hangers, then stand to put away all the clothes at once. This will reduce the overall impact on your knees, hips, and back that comes with bending over and standing back up repeatedly. Loading dishes into the dishwasher is another activity that requires repetitive bending and straightening of the knees, hips, and back. Instead, try washing the dishes by hand. You might even want to try washing dishes while sitting on a raised bar stool if standing for a long time is uncomfortable for you. Another easy change to implement is to simply wash the dishes soon after they're used so the food comes off more easily and the dishes don't pile up in the sink – this way you can wash them in shorter bouts of time and reduce the amount of work you have to do all at once. Lastly, if these ideas are challenging, you might want to try using dishware that is light or even try using plastic or paper plates and utensils. As you can see, there are many ways to modify your household activities and you might want to try several of them to find what works best for you. Ultimately, you might also want to consider having a cleaning company do the heavy cleaning in the house. While there is a cost, many working-aged adults with children do this and it allows them more

time with their family. It's the same for older adults with arthritis – having someone else do the heavy cleaning of the house frees you up to do other things on your agenda or maybe even take a nice walk!

Karen: Wow, that sounds great, I really like those suggestions. Let's talk about one last thing caregivers may be responsible for that could increase the physical burden of the job. Kaitlin, what tips do you have for caregivers who have to go outside the home to run several errands?

Kaitlin: Similar to the household chores, try to break up these tasks. Don't feel that you must go out and complete all the errands at once. Break them up throughout the week and, again, write them down to help you stick to a schedule. Also, ask for help! Can friends or family do some of the errands for you while they are out and about? You might need to plan this in advance, but it can be really helpful. With some trial and error, you will find a routine that works best for you. You can also check to see if your city has any public transportation with special services. Some cities offer local buses for people with disabilities, or even door-to-door, shared transport for those that can't use public transportation. Using these services can greatly reduce the amount of work you have to do when going somewhere with your care recipient. Lastly, some errands that once required you to go outside the house may no longer require you to do so. Our society has become so focused on making things convenient for people that many things can be delivered directly to your door, such as medications and groceries. Again, with each service there is a cost, so decide which errands you prefer to do yourself and which ones you'd rather get help with.

Karen: These are some great ideas. Now, let's talk about a different situation. Some caregivers may not have a very physically demanding job. For example, say the individual you are caring for has dementia. You may not require a lot of transferring or heavy lifting. However, because of their cognitive impairment, they require constant supervision. Amber, can't this still be very exhausting for the caregiver?

Amber: Yes, you bring up a great point. Despite the lack of heavy lifting, being in this type of caregiving role can still be very physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting. I must stress how important it is to take care of yourself. Make sure you are managing your arthritis symptoms and staying on a consistent sleep schedule so you are well-rested. You want to be prepared to accept the challenges of providing constant supervision. Again, try to find ways to take breaks! Does the person you're caring for take naps during the day? Do they like to do things in the community like participate in a water aerobics class or have lunch with friends? Is there a task that they can perform safely by themselves for long enough that you can relax for a little while – for example, watching a movie, doing a puzzle, or a crossword? Find ways to create breaks for yourself to give your body and your mind a time to rest and recharge. It's important to remember, you don't want to become so physically or mentally exhausted that you could potentially be caring for the individual in an unsafe way.

Karen: Thanks Amber, those are some great things to keep in mind. So I'm noticing a trend – no matter what type of activities you must perform as a caregiver, it is an exhausting job, and it's important to take care of yourself as well as your care recipient. In my experience, I've found it's common for caregivers to focus so much on their care recipient that they end up neglecting their own health, in this case, their own arthritis. Kaitlin, would you agree?

Kaitlin: Absolutely, and I'm really glad you brought that up. You must take care of yourself first before you can be in a good position to take care of someone else. Caregiving activities can involve both physical and emotional challenges. Make time to do the exercises you need to do to stay flexible and strong. It's important for you to be strong and physically active – this will make it easier to manage both your arthritis symptoms AND your caregiving activities. When you have a lifelong condition like arthritis, self-management of your arthritis symptoms is key. In other words, you are the one that knows your symptoms best. Start paying close attention to how your pain, stiffness, and fatigue go up and down throughout the course of a day. You want to see how certain things, such as exercise, sleep patterns,

time of day, and the caregiving activities themselves, are affecting your arthritis symptoms. Once you've learned more about these patterns, you can determine the best times to take your medications. As a caregiver, you make sure your care recipient receives their medications on time, so make sure you do the same for yourself. Setting an alarm or writing a schedule for the day, as we talked about before, are both great ways to remind yourself to take your medications at the same time each day. Lastly, as Amber just mentioned, find a way to incorporate breaks into your day – occasionally taking a little stress-free time for yourself is really important. Staying in control of your arthritis and remembering to focus on you, will not only help your symptoms but will also put you in a better position to do your job.

Karen: Thanks for emphasizing that point, Kaitlin. It's so important that caregivers remember that although their job is to care for someone else, they can't forget to take care of themselves. Before we wrap up, let's review the main points that we talked about. Keep good body mechanics when moving your care recipient from one surface to another. Try to create a schedule of all your chores and errands to help break them up throughout the day. Make sure you plan breaks or relaxation time to help reduce the chance of flare-ups. Remember there are many different ways you can change your household activities to make them easier, such as using equipment and outside services, and breaking these activities into smaller tasks. Lastly, you must take care of yourself to be able to safely take care of someone else.

Thank you Amber and Kaitlin for all the great suggestions you've provided. You highlighted important issues and gave some excellent ideas that caregivers can start immediately using in their lives. I'd like to also thank our listeners for listening! Be sure to check back next month to learn how to use Smartphone apps to track your arthritis symptoms. If you'd like to give us feedback, ask questions, or tell us about other topics that you're interested in, please send an email to ENACT at E-N-A-C-T@bu.edu. On our website, www.bu.edu/enact we have information about the center and a list of online resources for you to use. Until our next podcast, stay active!